

Podcast Series 3 - Reimagining politics through human rights

Episode 2 - Reimagining leadership: long-view politics

Mary Robinson

Hi, this is To The Righthouse, a new podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights. From scepticism to hope, from utopia to empathy, we discuss human rights, riding waves, but also signalling where the light is. This podcast was recorded in Venice, Italy, on the island of Lido at the Global Campus headquarters.

Graham Finlay (GF): Hello from the podcast To the Righthouse, produced by the Global Campus of Human Rights. My name is Graham Finlay and I'm hosting this episode of the third series of the podcast on 'Reimagining politics through human rights'. Today I'm delighted to talk to Mary Robinson, human rights activist, first woman president of Ireland, and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. She's also Chair and founding member of the Elders and honorary president of the Global Campus of Human Rights. Mary and I will focus on 'Reimagining leadership, long-view politics', but first, welcome to the podcast, Mary.

Mary Robinson (MR): Thank you very much, Graham. And I'm glad to link back with the Global Campus of Human Rights again.

GF: Yes, you've done so much for us, thank you. So, you've worked in so many different areas but I suppose most famously with certain planetary crises, not just climate but also nutrition. And how are planetary crises transforming current politics?

MR: Well, it's true that I do more and more look beyond just climate, to a climate and nature crisis and beyond that, I'm a guardian of the planetary boundaries that I believe are a necessary way of looking at what we're doing to the ecosystems that sustain us. And of those nine planetary boundaries, we're actually in the red on six of them, and it's not looking good. The one that we have recovered is the ozone layer. So that's a success story with the Montreal Protocol, and it shows that if we get multilateral agreement and political will on the urgency, we can, you know, retrieve some of the others.

GF: Yeah, actually, that brings to a question I really wanted to ask you, which is: what kind of instruments do world leaders like yourself need to reshape international politics? And is that beyond legal instruments? Obviously, the Montreal Protocol was a convention and a treaty, but what kind of instruments do you think would really help you and your work?

MR: I think we're stuck with imperfect international agreements. At the moment there are serious negotiations on a plastics treaty - as I'm sure you're aware - and that's very positive that the world realises we must reduce drastically our use of plastic, it's getting into our health, it's getting into our systems, it's getting into all the food chain, fish chain, and it's going to destroy us. So again, there is enough of a sense of urgency. When it comes to the climate issue, I think the problem is there's too much profit being made on

the dark side - as I call it - on the fossil fuel side; and that makes it much harder to move as quickly as we need to move.

GF: And do you think a certain form of... for the dark side, for the ways in which people can make advanced profits in short-term thinking, should we have some instruments which focus on sanctions, insofar as that's possible? Or do you think the largely voluntary approach which is being taken in business and human rights is working?

MR: We need much more effective systems, ways of addressing the fact that we...and I use this figure quite often because it comes from the beating of business leaders that I'm a member of - I'm not a businesswoman, I'm their moral conscience I think, but I've been with them since the beginning - and they estimate that we spend at least \$1.7 trillion every year on what is harming us, mainly fossil fuel and bad use of land, etc.. So that's a stupid use of money. We need to switch that money, but there is of course resistance to us doing so. In a way, I think we need a heavy carbon tax, price on carbon, ways of ruling out greenwashing by having more effective detection. That's happening, the way in which we're looking now at methane, for example, there are new satellites that are tracking methane and showing us the landfills and others that are causing huge methane release; so, we need far more of that, we do need the technology to serve a people-centred approach.

GF: Yeah, a lot of that technology - I know a little bit about - you know, cannot just sense global changes in something like methane, but also really low level, ground level local methane releases, which have profound effects on communities. I know you've been...

MR: Also important for litigation. You know, if it's possible to show causality, we can win cases, and we did win a wonderful case very recently, and I was delighted. It was Swiss grannies who brought the case to the European Court of Human Rights. I'm very proud of my friend Síofra O'Leary, the president of the Court, the first woman to be president, that during her time, the Court issued that very, very thoughtful judgement on the three cases before it, but in particular, on the Swiss grannies case, where they won, because Switzerland was not protecting their human rights. That has huge implications for the rest of Europe, and I look forward to quite a lot of litigation and I hope some of the people, and graduates of our Campus of Human Rights will think about how to bring more cases now, especially because, you know, there are guidelines, and also there is more proof of what is harming us.

GF: That's a terrific example of action by a particular group at national level. And I know, like I said, you've been working with local communities a lot over the last long while at this point, to try and bring human rights engagement in this space down to local level. And do you think that the politics is different when we're engaging with the sub-national level, or when we try to relate that to regional systems like the European Convention on Human Rights?

MR: Well, I think at the local level a lot of the issues are very practical. I spend a lot of time with communities of the Global South, and a lot of time with women. And very often, they don't talk necessarily about climate, but they talk about heat, and they talk about drought, and they talk about flooding. And you know, it's easy to bring them into an issue of climate. And I do believe that the concept of climate justice is a great way of linking human rights and climate, as we did in the preamble to the Paris Agreement. We had to fight very hard - and I was sorry it was only in the preamble - but we got a lot of human rights language, just transition and all of that, into the preamble of the Paris agreement. And, you know, we need to constantly

make those links through the Human Rights Council, through the UNFCCC, you know, being people-centred in the approach, not statistics, or science on its own, but very much looking at how it impacts on people; and at local level, that means very practical things.

GF: Yeah, we've talked in past podcasts about the importance of narratives including, especially perhaps, narratives of hope, right, and also about telling people's stories, and I think that really does fit with your focus on those communities. I just have a question about leadership, as someone who has exercised leadership in this area for so long, right? What are the features of rights-based leadership and politics? And does a rights-based approach require a different approach, a different form of leadership?

MR: I think a rights-based approach is basically a people-centred approach. Caring about the impacts of policy on people, and caring about it because you're a leader, because you serve the people who elected you to lead them. You know, especially in politics, there has to be a sense of a servant, servant leader. And far too many politicians don't see it that way; they see it as a way of exercising a kind of power over people, rather than service of people, which I think is important, but you also have to bring people with you. And you have to acknowledge, as I certainly do, that you never become elected to public office on your own. You are supported by a lot of people who trust you, they've come out and canvas for you because they believe when you say what you will try to do. And if you adopt a rights-based, value-based approach, you absolutely have to deliver, or else you're undermining everything.

GF: What happens when you have been, as a leader, especially a political leader, you sometimes have to make tough calls, where some people might either lose out or, you know, perhaps in some situations be seen to be not enjoying some of the human rights so that other people can enjoy different human rights. How do you see leaders in that situation, trying to explain it to the people who don't agree with you or the people who are losing out of a particular decision people are making?

MR: I think I had a particular experience of that when I served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, because as UN High Commissioner I was the principled voice of the UN calling out governments on human rights issues. And I was actually reprimanded on one occasion by Kofi Annan. It was because I had gone into Serbia during the terrible problem for the population of Kosovo, who were driven out of their country and they were in different places. And I had gone hoping to meet with Milosevic but he refused to meet with me because he thought I was going to serve a writ on him - I wish I had it, but I didn't. But I went to a small town, not so small town, outside Belgrade, about a couple of hours' journey. And as we landed, cluster bombs had been dropped on a residential area, and I criticised NATO heavily for those cluster bombs. And pressure was put on Kofi Annan by the Americans: 'She shouldn't be criticising NATO, give out to her', and I got a letter of reprimand, because Kofi Annan had to balance what you say, the diplomatic and the human rights. And I've spoken afterwards to my successors as High Commissioner, we all had problems with our boss, because we were true to the human rights, they had to be more diplomatic.

GF: That's a really interesting tension because, you know, in some ways, your role does have diplomatic aspects to it but obviously it can't be subsumed under diplomacy, because then you'd never speak out ever. How, you know, what is... I mean, in international contexts, what do you think is the role for diplomacy? And I guess maybe this is related to a question I really wanted to ask you. You've worked in so many contexts, you've already named a number of different contexts, including Serbia and Kosovo. Did you ever tailor your approach - either as an ambassador for human rights or as a member of the Elders, as someone who's

made interventions in so many different aspects of international - did you ever tailor your approach to the the local, cultural, social, political and religious context?

MR: Yes, I think that's really very important. I remember saying over and over when I was serving as High Commissioner that human rights need to be embedded in the culture, in the local culture, or they will not be relevant to people and their lives. And that means you have to understand that culture, and you have to move in accordance with that culture. I remember how important it was, for example, to have very good Asian mandate holders like Hina Jilani and her sister, who would talk about, for example, female genital cutting as being not culture, but harmful traditional practices. And that was a very important point to make. And yet, we also learned, and the Elders learned this when we engaged with early child marriage, the only way it works is by getting the whole village, the whole local area, to engage: from the Imam, to the men in the family, to the fathers with their daughters, etc. to recognise the importance of those daughters continuing in education. And we've sat in villages, and listened and encouraged villages to do precisely that, because that's the only way that human rights would move. And remember Eleanor Roosevelt's famous saying, which I often quote, I mean, unfortunately, as she said it, it wasn't very gender sensitive, that is: if human rights are to matter at all, they must matter in small places close to home, etc..

GF: That is a great quotation, which we've really taken to heart in this particular podcast. And again, probably in those conversations it's easier to find out the limits on how culturally and locally sensitive you can be by listening first, I think. I guess there are... Do you have any sense that there are just some practices which, where, even if you can't bring the people together, you can continue to speak out about them?

MR: Yes, I think it's, you know, it's really important, particularly sexual violence and sexual violence in conflict. We have to be unequivocal: zero tolerance of sexual violence in conflict, no excuses whatsoever. And it is really awful to see how it's not a matter of sexual, it's a matter of power over and harming the bodies of women, as our most recent Elder Denis Mukwege can speak to very eloquently. We're delighted to have him as a new Elder, he will bring a perspective from his work in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I actually visited him both when I was High Commissioner, and when I had my mandate for the Great Lakes in 2013-2014. He's a wonderful man. And, you know, if anybody can speak to, you know, the unacceptable, appalling, beyond rape, destruction of wounds, and destruction of girls and babies, that is part of trying to terrorise and, you know, have power over a community. It's.. that is unacceptable, unequivocally, ever.

GF: I mean, I think that's a terrific example, Denis Mukwege's work repairing as best he can the lives and the health of the victims of these horrendous crimes. It does bring home the sheer physicality of some of the worst crimes and some of the worst violations which are sort of beyond any kind of cultural spin, right? I mean, it's just a fundamental fact of human physicality which he's confronting, and has for so long. You.. that's a really great transition to what is probably my last question, which is, if we take all of the things we talked about, from systems-level problems to the the way that human rights violations and maybe human rights promotion can manifest in local communities, that we can see different ways of people enjoying their human rights versus things which, as you say, are just unacceptable and not to be tolerated. You know, how can the international system and its actors like yourself respond politically, in a constantly changing international politics? Do we need to reimagine politics within those systems? And how could they help us to do that?

MR: Well, the Elders have put forward what we believe is needed in our world. We're very focused on three existential threats: the climate and nature crisis, the pandemic crisis - because we're still not ready for the next pandemic, in fact, the discussions in Geneva are going badly - and thirdly, the nuclear weapons crisis. And across all three existential threats, the impact, for better or worse, of artificial intelligence. It's quite a portfolio for mere elders, and we're still looking at conflicts like the Middle East and Ukraine and Myanmar. But getting back to the existential threats, we believe that what is needed is what we call 'long-view leadership'. And this is a very compassionate leadership, it's a leadership that wants to address the problems and try to resolve them, not just manage or push them, or ignore them. And these are problems that cannot be solved at the national level, that need multinational and need the perspective of, you know, thinking about people now and also future generations. Secondly, long-view leadership requires thinking about... based on the science and reason. And thirdly, not populism and short-term magic solutions that don't work. And thirdly, listening to people, listening to all of those affected, which is the compassionate element. And we really feel that this is something that the world needs very badly. We're up against the impacts now of social media on everybody. The algorithms drive aggression, the algorithms drive us to the dark side, the algorithms drive us to misrepresentation, drive us to populist solutions, and they're very powerful, and they've somehow gone into our system in a way that is frightening. Because it's so pervasive. There's a lot of good in social media and communications, but the dark side has to be regulated. And it has to be regulated sooner rather than later, particularly to get rid of the hard porn that even children can watch now, get rid of all those forces of aggression that are pushing our world into more and more sort of aggressive speech that leads to aggressive action that leads to violence that leads to the problems we have.

GF: I think that's an incredibly helpful perspective. I don't think I've really thought about how short-termist populism is. And populism is a threat to our democracy, including through the... as you say, the reactions, the sort of even lashing out that it's a response to, or an expression of, I think, taking a long view, does give me hope for both our democracies, but also maybe our regional institutions even insofar as they're democratic. Do you have any idea of how we might democratise international institutions?

MR: Well, it's not going to be the answer to your question precisely but I want to take an opportunity to talk about the role of climate justice and the need for a broad climate justice movement. And this is more a bottom up movement approach to changing the reality and in particular in addressing the climate and nature crisis. And that brings me to talking about Project Dandelion, I'm wearing the emblem of the dandelion. It's the only flower or weed that grows on all continents. It's nature itself, it's very resilient. You can't get rid of it if you want to. It's also very regenerative of the soil with its deep roots. You can eat or drink every part of the dandelion and then how do you spread it? You blow. And we need a symbol that unifies all of the ways in which so many people, from the indigenous people saving the forests and the seeds to young people speaking out about their awareness of climate, but they're not able to change it - we need to do it - to entrepreneurs, philanthropists, the business community that's on the right side of this, artists, filmmakers, farmers, scientists, everybody. We're not connecting, and we need to connect to know our power. Because the reality is we're on the cusp of a cleaner, healthier, safer, fairer world, we should get very excited about it. It's just around the corner, it's that complete, renewable energy world that gets rid of pollution, that gets rid of what's harming us. And we're moving, we're actually moving faster, but we're not moving nearly fast enough for the science. And what's holding us up is the profit on the other side, the extractive approach, all of that that's a big way in which governments are influenced; the fossil fuel

lobbyists is at every COP on climate, every COP on the biodiversity, they're at the plastics treaty convention at the moment, they're there to try and slow things, misrepresent etc. So it's a big way in which we have to know our power through connecting in this emblematic, light-touch way that shows we are not alone. We are part of millions and millions of people who want this better world, who are pushing for this better world, and governments have to hear us and we have to know our power to persuade them.

GF: Well, thank you so much for talking to us. And thank you for spreading the seeds of human rights promotion like the unstoppable dandelion, and so I'll take that image with me. And thank you so much for everything you've done and for talking to us today.

MR: Not at all Graham, it's been a pleasure; and greetings to everybody involved in the Global Campus of Human Rights.